

ITERATIONS

Design Research & Practice Review

Issue 4 | December 2016



**INSTITUTE
DESIGNERS
IRELAND**

Muireann Charleton / Design and Crafts Council of Ireland

Erwin Springbrunn (1939-2015): Master Gold and Silversmith

On a desk in his studio, Erwin Springbrunn kept a picture of the Sagrada Família by Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926), one of Spain's most influential architects. It says much about one of Ireland's most important master gold and silversmiths and gem stonecutters. The great Catalan architect, Gaudí was known to have achieved a particular vision of Gothic architecture. Springbrunn also brought his own highly individual interpretation to gemstone fine jewellery in its curvilinear forms.

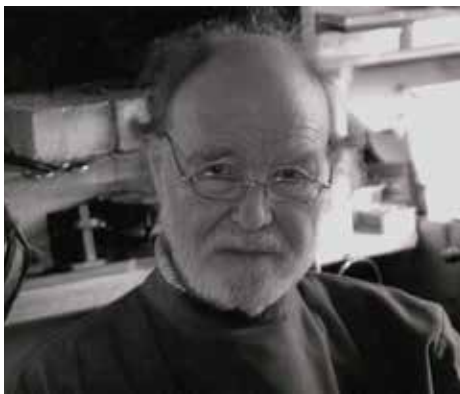


Figure 1: Erwin Springbrunn

Springbrunn (figure 1) was born in Bremerhaven, Germany and it was here that he apprenticed to his craft at 15 years of age. He followed this with studies in design, as well as special workmanship at the Higher State's art and craft school. In 1984, a move to Ireland took him to a secluded and ethereal area of County Roscommon. He had heard about the world famous Kilkenny Design Workshops (KDW), and visited Kilkenny to see the workshops at the Castle Yard, situated in the shadow of Kilkenny Castle. By the time he arrived in Ireland, the KDW (1963 – 1988) was winding down, but in any case Springbrunn was following his own path and vision. Settling in Roscommon was a big change for him from urban life in Switzerland. The quieter rural setting may have helped him to bring a timeless quality to his work.

Springbrunn is an artist who cuts and forms gemstones. This requires exacting techniques of cutting, grinding and polishing and, perhaps, the most important technique of all: precision. The ability to cut symmetrical patterns into tiny gemstones takes a developed eye that can only come about by experience over a life's dedication to the task. Springbrunn's discerning eye makes him unique as a master of gemstone cutting in Ireland. When I met him in his studio in 2015 he explained that *'the necessity to cut the stones myself, to overcome the monotony of standardised shapes'* was essential to his practice. Quite remarkable is also the fact that Springbrunn makes his own alloys.

Buying the gold pure, he makes up alloys from his own recipe. A fine and rare example of this is an 18 carat yellow gold neckpiece (figure 2) made in 2007. In this particular piece, Springbrunn has combined a dark red garnet stone from Tunduru, Tanzania, with fine gold and mammoth ivory. Here, the sharp

contrast of colour and texture is balanced by the strong, crisp edge of the stone setting. The surface of the mammoth ivory is natural, created by nature itself, having been buried in the permafrost over the ages. The stone on this piece is set from behind, which enables the mount for the stone to be flat and sharp. It is these thoughtful configurations of design and construction that ensure the brilliant aesthetic of the piece. The sheer power of the yellow gold colour, achieved by Springbrunn, is a result of creating his own alloys. He said he needed *'to do my own alloys to find a more suitable colour of gold for my jewellery'*, and he beautifully described the effect as being like *'warm sunlight'*. Springbrunn's principles in the quality of the colour of gold, reinforces how this precious metal was once so highly prized for its rarity and beauty in ancient times, revered for its immaculate glow.

According to Springbrunn, the *'works created back in Switzerland are much different from the ones that were created in Ireland'*. For him, the work is *'definitely shaped by a life of organic self sufficiency'*. The quietly powerful energy of life in a rural Irish setting provides its own beauty, and Erwin particularly referred to the *'birdsong, the darkness of night'*, and *'shapes of trees, blossoms of flowers – anything that has energy'*, as being sources of inspiration around him. The balance between realities and artistic visions were sought, and in time Springbrunn achieved a harmony and steadiness of work.

He has spent a life in pursuit of his own creative expression - a life lived at its most authentic. One of the star pieces on display in the jewellery section of the National Museum of Ireland's *'The Way We Wore'* exhibition at Collins Barracks is his 1999 brooch (figure 3). Gold set with an opal from

References

Described in Mairead Dunlevy's book pg. 66, Jewellery: 17th to 20th Centuries, (NMI, 2001)

the Mintabi area of Australia and Indian pearls, it presents a majestic force, at once both otherworldly and physical. This brooch represents an exceptional harmony of design. The resplendent pearls whoosh down a gold stream, diving downwards towards the opal that reflects the ocean. The precious gem is used here to complete the design, while also shaping the design itself, to achieve the unity of the piece. The delicacy and warmth of the gold on this brooch is breathtaking, a feat of architectural engineering in precious miniature. There is timelessness to this brooch that transcends its physical and contemporary presence in the National Museum of Ireland.

Springbrunn usually worked to commission, creating pieces of individual artistic jewellery for clients: admirers who greatly appreciated these works over the years. All of his creations are one-off pieces, demonstrating his vision and respect for individual artistic works, all created in his workshop in Roscommon. His process for making did not follow a uniform recipe.

According to Springbrunn, *'it's the sequence of learning, applying and again learning and applying, listening to and discussing with teachers, colleagues and clients. From that process I had to learn how to sketch and draw to incorporate my own personality.'* He asserted that he had been following this process for sixty years. For Springbrunn, the 'goldsmith's goal should be to do pieces of jewellery which are created and tuned to the uniqueness of the client.

With the fast ascent of computer-aided design, Springbrunn keenly felt the impending risk to loss of individuality, beauty and artistic searching *'for the essence of things'*. For him, creativity does not exist merely on its own in isolation. He reflected that *'if one is prepared to regard oneself as a vessel in which all kind of impressions can gather, then you are willing to give it a good shake, and if you are willing to accept the result, I think that outcome is pretty near to the term creativity'*.

In 2015 he celebrated his 76th birthday. Before he died in December he had been working on and completed a neckpiece in 18 carat yellow gold with a large top white-based opal from Brazil (figure 4). Between commissions, his work on this piece had been slow. It is a magnificent neckpiece composed of twelve hinged links of gold

openwork, its lineage, and cultural crossings of skill, involves the highest level of technical precision. Here, the hinging mechanism, which is hidden, does not interfere with the flow of the design. Reminiscent of the ancient torc or neck-ring in its shape, the beauty of this piece is that one can see through to the skin on each link ensuring the piece is elegant and not heavy, providing comfort for the wearer. The narrowing of the links also make the piece fit onto the neck with ease. The selection of the opal is complimentary to the gold, and while it is a considerable size, it is perfectly balanced with the fine metalwork. The use of opal over other precious stones has been carefully considered. The cool appearance of the opal is flattering to the warm, subtle straw yellow gold, which in turn highlights beautiful gold flecks within the opal stone.

The artistic and technical excellence, that characterises Springbrunn's work transforms ornamental objects into dynamic creations, rich with meaning and allure. It makes his work apt for a larger permanent display as a celebration of human endeavour and also of Irish art in fine jewellery for international viewers. Springbrunn's work positions itself alongside the great goldsmiths of early Ireland. He is a torchbearer of this ancient craft. His creations enable a continuation and navigation from the greatest historical works of goldsmithing from the Bronze Age to the present day.



Figure 2: 18 Carat Yellow Gold Neckpiece With Red Garnet Stone



Figure 3: Opel Brooch
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland



Figure 4: Neckpiece with Opal Stone